

The Plain of Memory

by

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(Scene i: It is late afternoon. Christiana is in the old Jewish quarter. She is standing before an iron fence, looking at a sign in Hungarian that seems to denote the opening/closing times: 7:30 - 6:30. She tries opening the gate; it does not open. Behind the fence are a few isolated graves. The date of death on all is 1945. Dark blue purplish berries stain the ground. They have fallen from a number of 15 foot leafy trees. The shadows from the leaves fall on the graves giving the impression of a military camouflage pattern. An elderly, Hungarian Jewish-American lady - after appraising Christiana - approaches her. She has a very simple matter-of-fact though warm way about her.)

OLD LADY

It's called the Heroes' Synagogue. The Germans used the big synagogue (*She gestures to the nearby Temple*) as an interrogation center....And this here...this is the Heroes' Cemetery...where people died in the ghetto..they had no place else to bury them...This whole street (*She sweeps her hand in an arc.*) was the ghetto...hundreds and hundreds of thousands of Jews....

(They begin to walk toward the main synagogue.)

CHRISTIANA

This street, it just doesn't seem...big enough to fit so many people.

(They are silent for a moment. Christiana stops and looks up at the large main synagogue. The old woman does too.)

OLD LADY

This was one of the most beautiful synagogues in Europe. It was so beautiful. I saw it before the war.

CHRISTIANA

Have you seen the inside, since?

OLD LADY

Not the same.

CHRISTIANA

I wanted to go inside but it's locked too.

OLD LADY

The sign says it should be open tomorrow until 6:30, but you never know.

CHRISTIANA

Uh huh.

OLD LADY

I'm old now so it doesn't matter, but I want you to see it.

CHRISTIANA

I'll try again tomorrow.

OLD LADY

You must come early. It's something you need to see.

(Lights fade out. Then....)

(Scene ii: Keleti Station - in the far background, one can hear a hollow cacophony of Hungarian track announcements, the hiss of exiting and arriving trains, and crowds of travelers. There is a slight echo to these sounds.

Christiana, still with her backpack, has returned to exchange money. She first double checks her money/passport pouch then returns it to its safe place. She goes up to a snack stand and stares at the posted menu. A very bored counter person waits for her to make up her mind. Christiana consults her phrase book.)

CHRISTIANA

Beszel angolul, kérem? (*Baesayl ONgawlool, KAYraem?* - "Do you speak English, please?"")

WAITER #1

Yes.

CHRISTIANA

I don't understand the menu. What does that mean...?

WAITER #1

Chicken, beef or pork?

CHRISTIANA

(*A beat.*) Do you have mineral water?

(The Counter Person stares at her.)

CHRISTIANA

Never mind.

(Christiana walks away, puts down her backpack to rest and watches the crowds walk by. Andrew Lot approaches from behind her.)

ANDREW LOT

Lost?

CHRISTIANA

No.

ANDREW LOT

You seem lost.

CHRISTIANA

I'm not.

ANDREW LOT

Just the look in your face.

CHRISTIANA

Tired, that's all.

ANDREW LOT

Waiting for a friend?

CHRISTIANA

(*Brief pause.*) Yes.

ANDREW LOT

My name is Andrew Lot. But I prefer Drew.

CHRISTIANA

Mister...Lot?

ANDREW LOT

Yes.

CHRISTIANA

I'm not lost.

(Christiana watches what is probably an off-stage scene where a stern policeman asks a young man for his papers. After examining them, he gestures for the young man to follow him. If done on-stage, the young man is to be played by the actor who will play István and the policeman by the actor who will play Miklós.)

ANDREW LOT

Oh, you're looking at that boy and the police - just his papers. It happens all the time. Probably no big deal.... I would have thought you'd like to speak to an American. Here in Budapest, your only alternative to speaking Hungarian is German.

CHRISTIANA

I know that.

ANDREW LOT

The streetcars and the Metro are that way. (A beat.) I bet you have a "Let's Go" book in your backpack, right?

CHRISTIANA

Yes, I do. My friend's only in the bathroom.

ANDREW LOT

You know, I know this city very well. You could take advantage of me.

CHRISTIANA

That's okay.

ANDREW LOT

Why?

CHRISTIANA

What?

ANDREW LOT

Why is it okay not to accept any help?

CHRISTIANA

I've traveled alot. I was just in Paris.

ANDREW LOT

I don't mean that you aren't capable. I can see that you are. But I've been living here awhile. Hungary may seem very normal on the surface, then the tiniest scratch can open up the communist vein. Besides, have you ever tried to speak Hungarian?

CHRISTIANA

Thank you, but really...

ANDREW LOT

I just saw a fellow American - I knew from the brand name on your backpack - and thought I could help. Listen, if you change your mind about wanting some company from home, you can find me at the Astoria Hotel. I dine there every night at eight. (*A beat.*) Oh, if you still need the Ibusz (*eeboos*) office, it's is just around that corner. You can book a cheap room there in a private apartment.

(*Blackout.*)

(Scene iii: a tea kettle whistles. Lights up. It is now morning. Christiana is at the table. This is the clean, friendly kitchen of Doctor Hegyi, a kind, warm middle-aged man who rents his spare bedroom to tourists. He speaks English fairly well, but slowly and with deliberation. Christiana responds by also speaking slowly and clearly.)

CHRISTIANA

Good morning.

HEGYI

Hello.... I made a cup of strong tea for you.

CHRISTIANA

Thank you.... Doctor Hegyi, I'm enjoying Budapest very much. I think I'd like to stay a few days longer.

(Hegyi freezes like a stricken rabbit.)

CHRISTIANA

Doctor Hegyi? I thought I would go over to the Ibusz (*misprounounce it as I-boos*) office and pay to stay a few more days here. Is that okay? If there's a problem...

HEGYI

How many...more days?

CHRISTIANA

(Perplexed.) Is two okay?

HEGYI

You must go over to the Ibusz (*eeboos*) office.

CHRISTIANA

Yes, of course.

HEGYI

You must go *right* away.

CHRISTIANA

I was going to go in about an hour.

HEGYI

You must arrange it right now.

CHRISTIANA

Okay.

HEGYI

No time. You must go there before trouble.

(Pause.)

(Scene iv: The lights change to "afternoon daylight". Multilingual voices of tourists {Japanese and German mostly, but absolutely no English}, birds, church bells, as well as a gypsy band in the distance, can be heard. The character of the Waiter enters with two cameras on a tray - a simple one for Christiana and a rather elaborate German camera for Hegyi who becomes the German Tourist in this scene. The Waiter immediately exits. Also entering is the German Wife with a simple change of clothing for the Tourist. This should be something expensive and well-tailored, e.g. a jacket. This should be a quick, efficient transition. She may begin speaking her first line as she does this.

They are all now taking in the view from the Fishermen's Bastion on top of Castle Hill. Matyas Cathedral, where a wedding is taking place, is nearby. Many tourists would be walking by with their cameras. Christiana has wandered to one end, while the German man and wife continue conversing.)

GERMAN WIFE

Helmut, komm mit. Wir sind spät dran. (*Hel^l-moot, kom mit. Veer zint shpei-t dran.* - "Helmut, come here. We're late."

GERMAN TOURIST

Ich komm gleich. Ich will noch schnell ein Foto machen. (*Ee-cH^a kom glicH^a Ee-cH^a vill nocH^a ein foto ma-H^a-en.* - "I'll be there in a moment. I just want to take one more photograph.")

GERMAN WIFE

Okay, aber beeil dich. Annette und Marcus warten auf uns im Restaurant. (*Okae, a-bear be-eil deeH^a. A-net-ta und Mar-coos varten a-uf uns im rrr-restaurant.* - "Okay, but not too long. Annette and Marcus are waiting for us at the restaurant.")

GERMAN TOURIST

Ja, ja. (*Ya, ya.* - "Yes, yes.")

(*The German Man correspondingly gestures with the meaning "Yes, yes, go along, go along. I'll be right there." The German Wife exits. Christiana now approaches the middle-aged man and catches his eye.*)

CHRISTIANA

Excuse me, would you please take a picture of me?

(*She gestures to the camera, then to herself and smiles. The man smiles and nods and points to his camera.*)

CHRISTIANA

Yes, of course.

(*Christiana first hands him her camera. He snaps a picture. Then, she may return the favor. Meanwhile, The Attaché - a handsome and conservatively dressed man - enters.*)

CHRISTIANA

Thank you. Thank you very much.

GERMAN TOURIST

Bitte sehr. Gern gemacht. (*Bit-tuh zehr. Gern ge-ma Ha t.* {Note: the "g" is hard as in "get", the "r" is soft. - "Don't mention it. Gladly done."})

CHRISTIANA

Uh...Danke. (*Dan-kuh* - "Thank you.")

(*The German tourist walks off. She looks back out at the river. The Attaché has quietly approached her and is standing nearby.*)

ATTACHE

Would you like me to take another picture of you - this time with the Chain Bridge in the background?

CHRISTIANA

That'd be great. Thanks.

(*She hands him the camera.*)

ATTACHE

Have you enjoyed Budapest so far?

CHRISTIANA

It's...one of the most beautiful cities I've ever seen.

ATTACHE

Still in school?

CHRISTIANA

Me? No.